

Conference Paper

Protests Against Controversial Art As a Political Strategy

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Abstract

The article discusses the phenomenon of politically motivated public outrage around art in Russia. The history of protests against art in Russia is relatively short but intense. Since 90's there occurred a number of attacks on art, the majority of which were protests against art that in some way expressed criticism of current state policy or Russian Orthodox Church. It may seem that in Russia the moral majority decides the fate of controversial artistic events, but as this article argues, that conflicts around art are frequently used by religious fundamentalists and nationalist right-wing groups to pursue their own political agendas and gain popularity in the media.

Keywords: hate spin, contemporary art, public censorship, offense, Russia, religious fundamentalism, SERB, vandalism


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1. Introduction

There have been a number of public protests against art in Russia for the past two decades and even brief observation of their chronology reveals that anti-orthodox and oppositional connotations of art prevail over another ethical stimulus like obscenity or racism. The history of unpunished attacks on controversial art created in today's Russia peculiar form of public censorship – organized campaigns initiated by public organizations that regularly vandalize and voluntarily disrupt artistic events which somehow criticize current policy and/or Orthodox Church. This article points out that the spontaneous outrage of the public is often confused with the demands of censorship and acts of vandalism initiated by religious fundamentalists and extreme right groups. The article argues that with the conflicts around art such public organizations pursue their own political agendas and are gaining popularity in the media.

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2. Methods

The aim of the article is to consider public protests in Russia from the perspective of what factors underlie this reaction in order to reveal the ethical stimulus and the nature of public outrage, which will be useful to distinguish affective arousal from politically motivated attacks. The analysis of the data is theoretically based on the concept of giving or taking offense as a political strategy or (“hate spin”), suggested by Cherian George. The analysis is empirically grounded in the Russian experience of protests against art.

3. Discussions

Emotional experience is an important part of our moral justifications. Protest reactions against art represent the phenomenal power of artistic engagement. Art that reflects some moral challenges usually evokes heavy emotional reactions and it is hard to distinguish “histrionic fanaticism from the spontaneous reaction of those whose sensibilities were offended” [1, p. 22]. Moral judgments are tightly linked to an emotional response and can take the form of a debate, polemic, discourse, and dialogue. The importance of affects in moral judgments was highlighted by Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt [2], who found out that quick and automatic affective reactions predominate in moral judgments. Marc Hauser proposed that moral judgments consist of much more complex cognitive analysis and both affective and cognitive processes are involved. Baring in mind both concepts (even though Haidt’s empirical evidence are more exhibitivie) we can conclude that emotions sometimes came prior than moral judgments [3, p. 12]. Thus there is a great chance that a morally unacceptable artwork can evoke protest reaction in an individual.

Contemporary cases of art conflicts rest on emotional responses to moral provocations which frequently take on the form of affective arousal. We hardly can qualify affective arousal as a complete determinant of society’s moral standards [4], because not every morally provocative artwork stir the outrage and it is often hard to distinguish what exactly became an emotional stimulus. One can say that protests against art are the feature of a wholesome democratic society, e.g. W.J.T Mitchell noted that “demonstrations in front of museums are a sign of a healthy state of affairs, not a regrettable anomaly that should be averted by fine-tuned policies” [5, p. 142]. But this statement needs some readjustments with regard to agenda-driven features of contemporary protests against art. It is also necessary to observe who conveys public

moral demands to art institutions. One of the main problems with assessing the extent to which the Russian audience was insulted by an art piece is that art protests in Russia happen alongside the state interests in censorship. Public protests against art that criticize current policy or Orthodox Church in today's Russia receive legal support which means that even if vandalism takes place, attackers will unlikely be punished but organizers of controversial exhibitions and artists can face serious criminal litigations. Criminal proceedings against the organizers of offensive art events are usually instituted under article 282 (incitement of hatred or enmity, as well as abasement of human dignity) and article 148 (insult of religious feelings of believers) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation [6]. This context provides an important concern over ideological and political motivations of allegations on supposedly offensive art – the frequency of art conflicts in which artists were found guilty and misleading media representation created a delusion that 1) art protesters act on behalf of outraged majority; 2) offended audience have a legal right for rage and violent behavior (both online and offline). The state abetting of morally, politically or religiously motivated vandalism against artworks is a dangerous practice but the aim of this paper is not to criticize legal regulations of cultural processes in Russia. The musing I would like to suggest is that incidents with morally problematic art in Russia are much more complicated than they are presented by media and they can be considered as platforms of the debate over control of the public spaces.

A number of thinkers have been generally outspoken about political motivations of the offense-taking, righteous rage, violence and protest reaction. Peter Sloterdijk claims that from the late 1980s there has been a transformation of new forms of religious and political fundamentalism [7, p. 74]. As Sloterdijk mentions “political opinions are conditioned and steered through symbolic operations that present a sustained relationship to the thymotic emotions of collectives” [7, p. 20]. It is vivid that art since late 1980 has become a notable activator of collective emotions and all steps of art production take place in the public sphere. There is a view that cultural wars or simply conflicts around art are in fact fights for privatizing public spaces and the content that can be presented in them [4, p. 11]. So the opponents of artistic freedom through affective arousal employed with considerable physical and medial investment try to become legitimate public censors. Scholars like Martha Nussbaum [8], Christopher Balme [4], Slavoj Žižek [9], Giorgio Agamben [10] now seem bothered by the religious and political intolerance and how it operates in contemporary society. This article contributes to the debate by attributing a number of attacks on art pieces motivated by its offensiveness to political strategy.

A sociological study of conflicts around art in the United States from 1965 to 2001 showed that public outrage around controversial artworks is used by politicians to communicate with voters and mobilize the electorate since the greatest number of protests against art coincided with electoral cycles [11]. Media researcher Cherian George proposes to consider the problem of offense-taking by one content or another not from a moral and philosophical point of view, but by studying its functioning in public discourse. George defines the phenomenon giving and taking offense as a political strategy or “hate spin”, in which artificial public outrage is used as a means to mobilize political supporters and intimidate opponents. The strategy of “hate spin” can focus on race, language, religion, nationality, and other aspects of identity. [12, p. 2957].



Figure 1: Data retrieved from the website-archive of art conflicts “Forbidden Art” [13].

Since the beginning of the 1990s in the Russian patriotic discourse, there has been emphasized the importance of the Russian Orthodox Church. The history of court proceedings concerning the insult of religious feelings formed the Russian version of “political correctness” [14, p. 82]. If we analyze the artistic conflicts that occurred between 1997 and 2015 in Russia (see Figure 1), we see that out of 133 protests against art, 64 were initiated by Orthodox activists (mostly fundamentalists) and 40 by right-wing and nationalist groups. Under the protests are meant mass meetings, criminal complaints to the Public Prosecutor’s Office, social media campaigns and acts of vandalism. Retrospective of protests shows that religious and political criticism in art prevails over another moral stimulus, such as obscenity or racism [13].

Most of the protests against art in Russia are not spontaneous reactions but organized campaigns. The first organized religious campaign against art in Russia was conducted

in 1997 against the NTV channel, which was supposed to broadcast the film “The Last Temptation of Christ” by Martin Scorsese [13]. Then, in 2003, after the group of church officers destroyed the exhibition “Beware, Religion!”, the court proceedings were instituted not against the vandals, but against the organizers of the exhibition. The events that followed the destruction are called by philosopher and one of the trial’s witnesses Mikhail Ryklin “the first large-scale “clean-up operation” in the territory of contemporary art and human rights in Russia” [1, p. 13]. Such a precedent in the law enforcement system of the Russian Federation created among activists a sense of impunity for the destruction of property of museums, galleries, and artists.

Cherian George argues that anti-extremist laws and laws against insulting religious feelings are counterproductive because they give power to the most intolerant groups of society, for example, nationalist groups [12]. As an example, we can mention Vasily Slonov’s personal exhibition “New Jerusalem” in 2018 at the Winzavod Center for Contemporary Art in Moscow that was attacked by members of the nationalist right-wing group “SERB” [15]. Members of “SERB” are well known for their attacks on art events, they regularly disrupt theatrical performances and exhibitions. In 2016 and 2017, they twice attacked the exhibition “Absence of Shame” by the American photographer Jock Sturges at the Lumiere Brothers center for photography in Moscow, accusing the exhibition organizers of promoting pedophilia [16]. The behavior of public organizations demonstrates extreme confidence in the justice of their indignation and readiness for extreme measures, which Slavoj Žižek describes in his work “Violence” as a fake sense of the need for urgent action in response to an infringement or insult [9, p. 6].

The use of scandals around art by right-wing radical groups for the realization of their own political agendas is not an exclusively Russian phenomenon. For example, in Paris in 2011, the resentment of Catholics around the provocative performance of Romeo Castellucci “On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God” turned into mass street riots involving right-wing groups [17, p. 129]. In general fundamentalists and attackers on art don’t have any “language” to actually orchestrate communication with those who don’t share their beliefs, thus they attack art physically. As Sloterdijk points out, today’s rage carriers do not have a convincing narrative and this is why other narratives like ethnic or subcultural are replaced by local simplified we-they constructions. In conflicts around art “we” – means healthy public opinion whilst “they” are demoralized others. Controversial or morally provocative art in this cases functions as a potential stimulus to initiate affective arousal which with the help of mass media could spread according to the principle of viral infections.

4. Implications

Politically motivated protests against art are usually mistakenly perceived as a spontaneous reaction of those whose feelings were insulted. This happens as a result of the substitution of public moral discourse around works of art with aggressive actions of nationalists and religious fundamentalists. We can come to this conclusion by observing the very fact that public outrage is often orchestrated, and the ones who are offended immediately seek media attention. Researches propose that offensive laws should be applied to cases that meet certain standards, e.g. offensive expressions should not be so broad as to instigate lawsuits against controversial artistic work [12, p. 2960]] which will help to mitigate the amount of politically motivated offense-taking from controversial art. At the same time, there is a necessity in further researches on the phenomenon of taking offense by art, as a personal and deeply individual emotional process.

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